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ABSTRACT

College theater programs should be evaluated and criticized on criteria that take into account the purposes of the programs and that have realistic bases for judging the effectiveness of instruction. The impact of college theater is based on its diversity as a training laboratory, as a part of a liberal curriculum, as a community theatre, and as a research center. College theaters, however, should be more dynamic and innovative than many are. The theater's various objectives should be identified and formulated in behavioral terms. Criteria can then be established for the evaluation of programs. Effective methods of evaluating students' achievements and planned instructional strategies for implementing the programs' objectives are also needed. (RN)

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DEVELOPMENTS IN SPEECH, 1928-1973, A SYMPOSIUM HONORING CLAUDE L. SHAVER

Louisiana State University

May, 1973

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THEATRE: THEY SAY YOU CAN'T TEACH IT

By Clark Rogers*

When the committee planning this symposium invited me to reflect on emerging patterns in theatre education, 1938-73, I knew almost immediately the approach I wished to take. It was to answer a challenge I received several years ago from a well-known practitioner of the American theatre. She was visiting our campus as an artist-in-residence, and I had anticipated meeting her for many weeks. My chance finally came at a faculty reception, where this memorable exchange took place: "Hello," I said routinely, "my name is Clark Rogers. I teach theatre history." "Hello," she replied, "I am a designer, and I am theatre history!" She then launched a surprizingly vehement attack on the whole idea of education theatre, concluding with this statement: "Believe me, Sir, you can't teach it."

Her assertion is all too familiar to those of us in theatre education. A professional director told me recently that anyone working in a college drama department had "copped out" somewhere along the line, choosing the happy haven of an institution over the risks involved in theatre. It was his opinion that college drama directors had given up the art of the theatre in favor of "playing games with children."

The problem of making just evaluations of what educational theatre attempts to do has become severe as college administrators have faced the financial uncertainties of the seventies. Columbia University recently abolished its theatre program, and several other colleges are considering the same action. Yet at a time when drama departments desperately need careful evaluation, they are more frequently subjected to inappropriate scrutiny from critics who are in no position to see the real problem.

The situation reminds me of a story I heard once of a man walking along a country road, when he looked over a rail fence and saw a peculiar sight. A bull was standing beside a tree, pawing the gound, snorting, and eyeing a large hole in the tree. Suddenly a man scrambled out of the hole and began

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to run. The bull charged him at once and, after a few good hits, forced the poor fellow back into the hole. The observer shouted, "Stay in the hole. I'll get help." But before he could do anything, the man was out of the hole again and running. Again the bull charged him. And again he retreated into the hole. This sequence was repeated several times until the observer was finally able to distract the bull and rescue the man. When he got him to safety, the observer asked: "Tell me, why didn't you take my advice and stay in that hole?" The fellow looked up weakly and said: "I knew you didn't get the whole picture. You see, there was a bear in that hole!"

Many critics of theatre education in this country simply cannot see the whole picture, and the errors they commit in the name of evaluation are understandable. For example, they equate play production quality with program quality and expect the educational theatre director to overcome the restrictions of time and talent in performances. Or they demand that educational theatre productions speak to a wider audience than the immediate community provides. In short, they bring to an educational theatre program the same criteria they would apply to a professional theatre enterprise, and not surprisingly, educational theatre is found wanting.

The worst aspect of this situation is not that educational theatre is criticized but that it is criticized for the wrong reasons. We who are responsible for the improvement of educational theatre instruction have no realistic basis for judging the effectiveness of our teaching in order to know where modification should be made. The most hopeful prospect for sound evaluation resides in the experience of those of us within the field, those who have some idea of the vastness and complexity of the whole picture.

Part of that picture is the historical development of theatre education, and Hubert Heffner has deftly summarized that development in a recent article for The Carolina Play-Book.[1] I am not going to review here the information in that article except to note that George Pierce Baker is generally considered "the Dean of Academic Theatre." Baker taught a course in playwriting at Harvard. But Harvard never cared much for Baker's interest in the theatre. The antipathy of Harvard to educational theatre was so great, in fact, that it turned down a wealthy patron's offer to build a playhouse for the school. So, in 1924, the theatre and Baker went to Yale.

One reason for Baker's acclaim as "the Dean of Academic Theatre" was that, back in 1907, one of Baker's graduate students--Edward Sheldon--had one of his plays, Salvation Nell, produced for a year's run on Broadway by the celebrated actress Minnie Maddern Fiske. The rest is history, and you are familiar with the names of young men who heard of Sheldon or Baker and beat a path to "English 47." But it was not that famous list of "professionals" who studied under Baker that established him as a great theatre educator. Few theatre historians realize that Lee Simonson and Robert Edmond Jones had no chance to study or practice scene design when they attended Harvard. In Cambridge, Baker never had a course in acting or production. And his famous 47 Workshop, which he started in 1912, was always extra-curricular. It is doubtful that those distinguished playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill, who came under Baker's tutelage, stayed with him long enough to learn much

about writing plays.

I do not mean to imply that Baker was not a first-rate teacher of the craft of theatre; rather, I wish to emphasize that the students who were most influenced by Baker's approach became educators themselves. We know that Frederick Koch, in North Dakota and North Carolina, and A. M. Drummond, at Cornell, launched theatre curricula after studying at Harvard. They were joined by Thomas Wood Stevens, E. C. Mabie, Alexander Dean, and others in establishing educational theatre across the land.

The ideas of these founders have diffused beyond real analysis, so that attempting to resurrect their educational philosophies would be a hazardous task. Let me simply report what I heard from a panel of distinguished theatre alumni who returned to the Carolina campus to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Playmakers in 1968. Discussing their careers in a mood of reminiscence, these practitioners agreed that it was not the technical training in their craft that they learned from "Prof" Koch (They learned that later). But they felt indebted to him for what Heffner called "a liberal or humanizing education in the art of the theatre." Samuel Selden clarified the objectives espoused by the founders of educational theatre when he told me that "the principal value of educational theatre lies in its cultural factors." He went on to explain what he believes those factors to be:

> Everybody wants to live more fully, more effectively, more efficiently. Human living is participation in a continuous series of confrontations with aspects of nature, opposing actions of other people, conflicting sides of one's own personality.
>
> Theatre provides, as nothing else does, sharply concentrated, stimulating, illuminating experiences--through vicarious imagery--in various kind of confrontations, confrontations that stretch our understanding and mastery of living.
>
> It is said that play-going gives us an opportunity for escape from the tediousness of living. At its best it calls us, not out of life, but into life.[2]

Selden represents another generation of leaders--including Hubert Heffner, Claude Shaver, and others--who have exerted a powerful influence in shaping the characteristics of the field. Indeed, theirs has been a unique contribution to the history of the theatre, for in no other modern country has theatre made so large a place for itself in academic communities. Theatre education has come far enough to rival many of the more "academic" disciplines in the number of students it enrolls and the number of courses it offers.

Each year more and more universities have inaugurated graduate departments in theatre studies. Statistical Abstracts of the United States reported that there were 2,546 Master's Degrees and 301 Ph.D.'s awarded in Speech and Drama for the academic year 1969-70. Perhaps one-third of these were in

theatre. According to the Educational Theatre Journal, in 1971 there were 217 theatre doctoral projects in progress from a total of thirty-nine institutions (the largest number of entries and schools for any single year to date).

Critics of the system argue that such an expansion of theatre training within our centers of higher education should have resulted by now in a noticeable improvement in American professional theatre artistry. Such an improvement would be gratifying justification for the huge sums of money spent on campus theatre plants, of teacher time and energy, and of the philosophy of education that has generated college theatre studies. But the fact is that we cannot document our achievements with a list of brilliant college-trained professional practitioners. Even if we could ascribe the success of the American professional theatre today mainly to educational theatre--and I am sure we cannot--it would scarcely justify our system in the light of European theatre, which is not served as we are by university curricula.

Over the past few years I have had the opportunity to examine closely the training programs in several London theatre schools. As training centers for theatre artists, professional schools like the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Central School of Speech and Drama are unquestionably superb. And for the encouragement of playwrights, directors and designers it is hard to imagine anything better than the European repertory system, with its permanent staff, its continuing management and its state support.

If we were to rest the case for the American educational theatre upon a comparison of our contribution to the professional stage and that of the European system, it would take a very prejudiced jury to decide in our favor. Nevertheless, I am not willing to join that chorus of critics who deny the system any virtues whatsoever .

The University theatre is having a far greater impact than one that can be measured in numbers of highly skilled professionals it has produced. This impact is a result of its diversity. The campus theatre is a training laboratory, but it is also a part of a liberal curriculum, a community theatre, and a research center. And it is an astonishing fact that the University theatre is witnessed by three times as many people each year as attend the professional theatre in New York.

The story, briefly told, is this: The era of the traveling road show, which once supplied a vast network of theatres and opera houses throughout the country, is gone for good. Television and motion pictures have become popular entertainment sources. The professional theatre has centered more and more in New York, supplying legitimate theatre as entertainment for a shrinking audience. During a typical season in the 1930's, New Yorkers saw 233 productions; in 1963, the total was fifty-four. In 1927, there were seventy-seven Broadway theatres; today there are thirty-four.

Yet, at the same time that the professional stage was diminishing in size, a massive theatre movement was evolving throughout the United State. The movement was a direct consequence of the growth of academic theatre departments--but, ironically, it was neither intended nor foreseen by the founders

of educational theatre. While professing to believe in a philosophy of liberal education, the universities had in fact been turning out students in ever increasing numbers for a professional theatre industry that was steadily decreasing in importance. And, to train students for such an industry, the universities had built beautiful, well-equipped theatres--in many cases better equipped than any theatre on Broadway.

The result of what the universities have built is just now becoming clear: A few years ago there was only New York as a goal for students with professional aspirations. Today they start in one of the numerous university-sponsored summer theatres, festival theatres, or outdoor theatres. Then they often return to the university as graduate students, artists-in-residence, or even as teachers.

Young playwrights whose manuscripts accumulated on the desks of busy New York producers now send their plays to theatre departments. For example, through a special arrangement with the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, the Carolina Playmakers now produces two or three original scripts each year as a part of the main stage series. And the American College Theatre Festival will sponsor a special division for the production of new plays, beginning next year.

I do not mean to imply that the professional theatre has completely lost its appeal. That, I am sure, it will never do. But already nearly as many actors, directors and designers are employed in university-sponsored theatres as earn their livings on professional stages. (After all, Broadway produces approximately fifty plays each year; university theatres present approximately twelve hundred.) In 1966, Bernard Dukore edited the remarks made at a symposium on theatre education in which spokesmen from various departments answered the questions:"What are you trying to do? How are you going to do it?"[3] One development seems apparent from their replies: That universities are more and more frequently attempting to provide liaisons with professional theatre companies.

Now that theatre in higher education has gained a degree of stability, and now that recent financial cut-backs have forced a pause on much of the expansion activity of the past, perhaps this is a good time for a careful assessment of the field. The combination of theatrical artistry and the freedom of thought in academic communities could result in a dynamic and innovative theatre tradition, producing endeavors that could enlighten the practice of theatre everywhere. Unfortunately, however, the university theatre has never consolidated its gains.

Rather than capitalizing on our unique position as an institutional theatre, free to fail, we have too often set up little models of our own ailing professional theatre, where box-office is all. Rather than "doing our own thing" (a prerequisite for any artist), we have been timid and imitative. All you have to do is glance over the production lists for American colleges to see that as directors we tend to be conventional and conservative, tending toward "tried and true favorites" or "warmed-over Broadway." Never before in the history of world theatre has there been such emphasis on

reviving plays! Production may be more innovative than play selection, but even there we face minor variations on established themes.

Of course, prudence is a good thing, but to refuse new directions simply because they are new is not prudence but timidity, and I cannot emphasize too strongly how much timidity influences our work. We approach the expression of an original concept with about as much pessimism as the little boy who was about to start out on his first railway journey alone. His mother told him to write his name and address on a card and keep it in his pocket. He wrote, 'In case of accident, this was Johnny Jones.'

Our instructional programs are plagued by a tendency to follow one craze after another with exaggerated zeal. Our devotion to Delsarte was followed by an infatuation with Stanislavsky, which has been replaced in recent years by a mania for Grotowski. These fads represent a serious defect in our development, for we have substituted capricious amusement for sustained growth. All you have to do is serve for a while as admissions officer for a graduate program in drama, as I do, examine the transcripts and compare the student's record with his actual performance, to see the lack of quality and consistency in theatre education.

What is to be done? A first step toward improving quality is to admit that there is no such thing as the educational theatre; instead, there are educational theatres. Our strength is in our diversity, and we must be willing to put aside our own individual preferences for one type of program or another, and to accept the legitimacy of varying departmental goals arising from different educacional situations. In 1964, Burnet Hobgood surveyed college theatre programs in various sections of the country. His report was informative, for schools ranged widely in their uses of dramatic art: recreational, avocational, liberal arts-humanistic, liberal arts-vocational, pre-professional.[4] Not enough inquiry of this kind has been going on in recent years to allow us to see emerging patterns in theatre education clearly enough.

The usefulness of identifying these patterns is that we can appreciate the many objectives of theatre programs and evaluate them in their own terms, without confusing one with another. Only when our objectives are clearly stated can we begin to support them with appropriate teaching strategies. Only then will our criteria for students and staff have better definition.

As you well know, teachers have been urged for a long time to develop objectives. But only in recent years have they been told to state these objectives in behavioral terms--that is, not in terms of what they will teach but, rather, in terms of what the student will be able to do at the conclusion of the instruction. Objectives stated this way leave little doubt about what our instructional intentions are.[5]

In order to organize our theatre programs toward explicit objectives, we begin by stating those objectives in no uncertain terms. Catalogue descriptions are often so vaguely worded that a student has little idea of what kind of program he has entered until he has finished it. For example, a student

might well enter one of our state universities expecting to embark upon a curriculum of "professional training" and then find that he must complete a heavy load of humanistic studies that are in no way designed to help him meet his objectives. Departments have few qualms about offering degress that they cannot support with programs or with personnel.

It is our responsibility to write our catalogue copy in such a way that it represents a contract with our student, accurately describing how he will be able to perform when he has successfully complete the course of studies.

A second step in reforming our theatre curricula is to devise methods of evaluating the student's achievement of our stated objectives. If we are committed to the improvement of instruction, then we must make some evaluations of student progress in order to know where modifications are needed in our teaching. The problem is to design measurement instruments that properly reflect the objectives we are trying to achieve.

Finally, we must plan instructional strategies to implement the accomplishment of our objectives. Many instructors labor on with antiquated teaching methods they learned by imitating their own teachers years ago, ignoring important advances in education. During the last eight to ten years instructional technologists have produced major breakthroughs in their efforts to understand the learning process. Their recommendations for effective learning include: (1) the active response of the student to carefully sequenced material. (2) Immediate knowledge of results, whereby the student judges right away the accuracy of his response. (3) Self-pacing, which makes it possible for the student to proceed at his own speed. (4) Continual evaluation of program effectiveness. The enormous impact of these and other conclusions should not be underestimated, and a consideration of research relevant to instruction for educational theatre is clearly in order.

But it is not my purpose in this speech to convince you of the legitimacy of any instructional approach. No approach will ever replace the living teacher, because students learn most from other human beings--from hearing what they say and watching what they do. The teacher is a model from whom a student gains direction and style for his own life.

They say you can't teach it, but I believe a few great teachers have already proved them wrong. It is not that we <u>can't</u> so much as it is that we <u>won't</u>. How many graduate students are getting advanced degrees as something to "fall back on" in case they fail to make it in New York? How many of them will teach only if they have to? I wonder if they realize how much preparation it takes to teach effectively, and how few people have managed to do it well.

If we decide to try, we must constantly correlate the actual with the possible: (1) What <u>can</u> we do in this situation? (2) What do we <u>want</u> out students to be able to do when they have completed this program?

And remember, to say that we will do one thing necessarily means that we will forego doing something else. Too many of us are trying to be all

things to all men, and we are failing at everything.

Will Rogers used to say: "There ain't but one word wrong with every one of us in the world, and that's selfishness." And it is that word that often keeps us from dealing honestly with our students and with ourselves.

NOTES

[1]Hubert C. Heffner, "The Growth of Academic Theatre in the United States," The Carolina Play-Book, Commemorative Issue (1973), pp. 1-11.

[2]Letter from Samuel Selden, April 1973.

[3]Bernard Dukore, editor, "Professional Companies, Professionalism, and the University Theatre Department: A Symposium," Educational Theatre Journal, 28 (May 1966), pp. 97-109. See also: "International Conference on Theatre Education and Development," Educational Theatre Journal, Special Issue (August 1968).

[4]Burnet M. Hobgood, "Theatre in U.S. Higher Education," Educational Theatre Journal, 16 (May 1964), pp. 142-159.

[5]Arthur M. Cohen, Objectives for College Courses (Glencoe Press, 1970). See also: W. James Popham and Eva L. Baker, Systematic Instruction (Prentice-Hall, 1970).